

PETER'S DELIVERANCE AND HEROD'S DEATH

BIBLE TEXT : Acts 12:1-23.

LESSON 323 Junior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Acts 12:1-23

¹ Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth *his* hands to vex certain of the church.

² And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

³ And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)

⁴ And when he had apprehended him, he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.

⁵ Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him.

⁶ And when Herod would have brought him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and the keepers before the door kept the prison.

⁷ And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon *him*, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise up quickly. And his chains fell off from *his* hands.

⁸ And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me.

⁹ And he went out, and followed him; and wist not that it was true which was done by the angel; but thought he saw a vision.

¹⁰ When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord: and they

BIBLE REFERENCES:

NOTES:

Herod Agrippa

By the Romans King Herod was made the ruler of Palestine. He was not one of the Jewish people; but in the few years that he ruled he sought to gain their favour. One way that he could please the Jews was to mistreat the followers of Jesus Christ. Herod began to stretch forth his hand against them. If had been almost ten years since Stephen had been killed (Lesson 289). During that time, the disciples had scattered into all parts of the land, spreading the Gospel wherever they went (**Acts 8:1 ¹ And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.** Churches were established in Samaria and in Antioch, where the disciples were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26). Saul of Tarsus had been converted (Lesson 301). Peter had been sent to the home of Cornelius and had preached about Jesus, and the Gentiles had received the Gospel (**Acts 11:1 ¹ And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.**).

No doubt the Jewish officials had hoped to frighten the disciples by persecution and threatening words (**Acts 5:40 ⁴⁰ And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.** But instead of stopping the work of the disciples, they caused the Gospel to be spread all the more.

James

Our lesson today tells about the first Apostle to be a martyr. A martyr is one who give his life for his Christian faith rather than deny his belief in Jesus. James was the first Apostle to be martyred. He was the brother of John, and a son of Zebedee (**Mark 1:19 ¹⁹ And when he had gone a little further thence, he saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the ship mending their nets.** He was a fisherman when Jesus called him. Along with his brother, he immediately left his father and the ship to follow Jesus (**Matthew 4:22 ²² And they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him.** Later James was called to be one of the twelve Apostles (**Matthew 10:2 ² Now the names of the twelve apostles are these; The first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother.** He was one of the three who were very close to Jesus. James was with Jesus at the time of His transfiguration (Lesson 114). James was in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus as He prayed in agony. He as one of the three to whom Jesus had said, "Watch with me" (**Matthew 26:38 ³⁸ Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me.** After Jesus had ascended into Heaven, James was obedient to Jesus' command to wait for the promise of the Father (**Acts 1:4 ⁴ And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me.** He went with the others to an upper room in Jerusalem to pray (**Acts 1:13**

went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him.

¹¹ And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and *from* all the expectation of the people of the Jews.

¹² And when he had considered *the thing*, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying.

¹³ And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a damsel came to hearken, named Rhoda.

¹⁴ And when she knew Peter's voice, she opened not the gate for gladness, but ran in, and told how Peter stood before the gate.

¹⁵ And they said unto her, Thou art mad. But she constantly affirmed that it was even so. Then said they, It is his angel.

¹⁶ But Peter continued knocking: and when they had opened *the door*, and saw him, they were astonished.

¹⁷ But he, beckoning unto them with the hand to hold their peace, declared unto them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, Go shew these things unto James, and to the brethren. And he departed, and went into another place.

¹⁸ Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter.

¹⁹ And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that *they* should be put to death. And he went down from Judaea to Caesarea, and *there* abode.

²⁰ And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him,

¹³ **And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James).** There they received power to be witnesses for Jesus (**Acts 1:8** ⁸ **But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth).**)

Persecution

This was the James whom Herod killed with a sword. We are told that it was considered a disgrace to be beheaded with a sword, and that that was the way James was killed. No doubt Herod had hoped that by bringing death and disgrace to this Apostle who had been close to Jesus, the others would not be so bold in their preaching. At the same time, Herod's actions would please the Jews, and he would gain favour with them. To James, it meant that his sudden death would be sudden victory and he would be with Jesus, whom he loved very much.

Peter

When Herod saw that James' death had pleased the Jews, he caused more persecution. This time he had Peter seized and put in jail. It was at the time of the unleavened bread, the keeping of the Passover, at our Easter time. Peter was well guarded in prison and Herod planned to keep him there until after Easter.

This was not the first time that Peter had been in prison because of his preaching of the Gospel. One time the authorities had released him, along with John, because they could find "nothing how they might punish them" (Acts 4:21). The Apostles were commanded to preach no more in the name of Jesus (Lesson 283). Another time, an angel of the Lord opened the prison and freed the Apostles (**Acts 5:19** ¹⁹ **But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said).** They had been imprisoned because they had continued to preach about Jesus. They were taken before the Sanhedrin. Peter and the others said, "We ought to obey God rather than men." This time they were beaten before they were released (**Acts 5:40** ⁴⁰ **And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go).**

Perhaps Herod knew of the time when Peter had escaped, even though the prison was "shut with all safety, and the keepers standing without before the doors" (Acts 5:23). This time Herod ordered Peter to be put in the inner prison with 16 soldiers to guard him.

Prayer

Peter was in a serious situation. There was no earthly help for him. There was no law and no lawyer to have him freed. But there were some of his friends who were praying. The disciples gathered at the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. There they prayed without ceasing for Peter. No doubt, day and night, all the time he was imprisoned, prayers were offered in his behalf.

When a problem seems to be hopeless, some people think there is no use to pray. Others give up after they have prayed once or twice. May we learn a lesson from this that "with God all things possible" (Mark 10:27).

The days went by, and Peter was still in prison. Finally there was just one more night before Peter was to be brought before the people for trial. Peter was not afraid or worried about what would happen to him. He knew that the Lord's people were praying for him. No doubt he had been praying, too. Usually God's people prayed like Jesus prayed: "O my Father, . . . thy will be done" (Matthew 26:42). Peter probably felt as Paul, who said:

and, having made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king's *country*.

²¹ And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them.

²² And the people gave a shout, *saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.*

²³ And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.

"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Peter was ready to live or to die for Christ.

Deliverance

That night, all was dark as Peter went to sleep, chained between two soldiers. Suddenly there was a light in the prison, and the angel of the Lord appeared. Peter thought he was seeing a vision but he did as the angel told him. As he arose, the chains fell from his hands. Peter put on his shoes and coat and followed the angel. They went past the first and the second ward. As they came to the outside gate, it opened of its own accord. After they had passed through the iron gate, leading to the city, the angel left Peter. Then he realised that it was not a vision. He was delivered from prison. There were no sirens sounding, no guards shouting his escape. All was quiet, because God had sent the angel to perform this miracle. Peter said, "Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews."

Faith

Peter decided to go to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where he knew the people of God were praying. He wanted to be with the people who had prayed for him. He wanted to tell them how God had answered their prayers and delivered him. When Peter knocked at the door, a young woman by the name of Rhoda asked who was there. When she recognised Peter's voice, she was so excited and happy that she forgot to open the door to let Peter in.

Rhoda went to tell the others. They had prayed for Peter many days without ceasing. When their prayer was answered and he was delivered, it seemed too good to be true. They could scarcely believe that it was Peter who continued to knock outside the door. When they saw him, they were astonished. God had worked such a miracle! Peter held up his hand to quiet them, and he testified of his deliverance.

Peter left and went to another place, after he had asked the disciples to tell James. No doubt this was the James who was regarded as overseer of the Church at Jerusalem. (**Acts 21:17-18** ¹⁷ **And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.** ¹⁸ **And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present**) When the people of God have prayed for us, and God delivers us, it is only right that we should let them know what the Lord has done. Peter wanted James and the other brethren to know that he was safe because God had delivered him.

Does it not seem strange that these praying people were astonished when Peter was released by the angel? Perhaps God gave this lesson as an example for us. Do we always have faith to believe that our prayers are answered? In the Bible we read, "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24). To a father who brought his demoniac son to be healed, Jesus said, "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth" (Mark 9:23). These are the words of Saint John: "This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: and if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him" (I John 5:14, 15). May this lesson help us to pray more, and to have more faith when we do pray.

No Mercy

The next morning there was a great stir in the prison. Peter was nowhere to be found. Apparently the soldiers had slept as the angel set Peter free. The iron gate must have gone back in place as miraculously as it had opened of its own accord. Peter

was not to be found. The jailers were questioned before Herod. None knew anything about Peter's escape. When they could not account for Peter, Herod ordered them to be killed.

This man who had planned to put Peter to death was soon to die. Herod had no love for the disciples. In persecuting them, Herod was fighting against God. But there came a time when God was against Herod.

Smitten by God

For some unknown reason, Herod was displeased with the people of Tyre and Sidon. They had made friends with Blastus, who held a place of honour close to Herod. They wanted to be at peace with Herod, so arrangements were made for him to talk to them. There was a certain time set when Herod would deliver a speech to them. He was dressed in his royal apparel as he sat upon his throne in view of the people. Apparently they liked his speech, because they gave a great shout, saying, "It is the voice of a god, and not of a man." Herod like those words of flattery, and did not deny them. He liked the honour for himself and did not give the glory to God. But Herod's glory did not last long. As he sat there before the people, he was smitten by God. His disease was a horrible one, and it has been said that he was in great pain. In his suffering he soon died.

These two men in our lesson represent the two kinds of people in the world. Those, like Herod, who have no regard for God and who persecute His people, must endure the judgments of God. If Herod had prayed, his life could have been changed. Those, like Peter, who have a concern for God and His work, have been delivered through prayer. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

QUESTIONS

1. Why was James killed?
2. Who killed him?
3. Who was imprisoned?
4. Why was he put in prison?
5. What did Herod plan to do to Peter?
6. How was Peter released?
7. Who prayed for Peter?
8. What happened when they prayed?
9. What kind of ruler was Herod?
10. Why did the judgment of God fall upon Herod?